

BEN 10: ALIEN FORCE - “Trade-Off!” - Len Wein

OPEN TEASER in the secret HQ of DARKSTAR, as he sits studying a large ancient book. Suddenly, the door is smashed off its hinges and KEVIN charges in, furious. Before Darkstar can really say anything, Kevin attacks and a battle begins. Though it's not very obvious, all Darkstar is doing is defending himself against Kevin's relentless attack, never acting the aggressor. When Kevin says Darkstar will regret Kevin finding him here, Darkstar replies that he hopes that isn't so...otherwise he'd never have left a trail so obvious even Kevin could follow it. Darkstar wanted Kevin to find him here. Both their lives depend on it. And, off Kevin's confused expression, we END TEASER.

ACT ONE OPENS with Kevin, still ready to continue the fight, asks Darkstar what he's talking about. Darkstar asks Kevin if he likes being stuck in his elemental form. About as much as Darkstar likes his own condition as a grotesque energy-vampire, Kevin replies. Precisely, says Darkstar, so what would you say if I told you there was a way for both of us to be normal again? When Kevin asks what Darkstar is talking about, Darkstar shows Kevin the ancient book he was reading earlier, specifically an illustration of an ancient artifact of a vaguely-horseshoe shape. Darkstar explains that this artifact has recently been uncovered on an alien world and that it has the power to restore both of them to normal. When Kevin asks why Darkstar is sharing this information with him, Darkstar replies that it's because he can't get to the artifact alone. He needs Kevin's help and is willing to trade the cure for it. Kevin ponders this for a moment, then catches a glimpse of his own pathetic reflection and quickly tells Darkstar he's in.

CUT TO: back home, where BEN and GWEN wonder where Kevin is when they can't seem to get in touch with him.

CUT TO: Kevin and Darkstar landing a spaceship on a barren alien world. Cautiously, the two of them approach a crumbling ancient temple that is guarded by huge stone alien statues. As they enter the temple, they trip some sort of switch that activates the temple's defenses and the stone statues shake off the dust of centuries and attack both Kevin and Darkstar.

Using their powers to the utmost, Kevin and Darkstar fight their way through the gauntlet of statues, destroying them as necessary, until the two of them reach the temple's innermost chamber, where they find the artifact they're looking for, resting in the huge hands of the biggest statue of all. Carefully, Kevin climbs up into the giant hands, reaches for the artifact and, at that moment, the hands begin to close around Kevin, threatening to crush him, as we END ACT ONE.

ACT TWO OPENS with Kevin struggling with all his strength to keep the stone hands from crushing him. It takes the skills of both Kevin and Darkstar to extricate Kevin from the hands just before they clap shut. When Darkstar asks if Kevin is all right, Kevin smiles and holds up the artifact, saying that, all things considered, he couldn't be better.

Now, artifact in hand, Darkstar and Kevin race back to their spaceship, more stone guardians in hot pursuit, and barely manage to take off for home.

CUT TO: Earth, as the spaceship lands in a wooded area outside town, and Kevin and Darkstar exit with the artifact. Darkstar tells Kevin it's time for them to put the artifact to use. Darkstar explains that the artifact is designed to balance their powers, allowing Darkstar to absorb enough energy from Kevin to make Kevin normal again, while the influx of energy restores Darkstar to normal as well, shutting down both their powers. At Darkstar's instruction, Kevin grabs one end of the artifact, while Darkstar holds on to the other end, possibly intones some ancient enchantment, and the artifact begins to glow. The glow expands to include both Kevin and Darkstar, and Kevin comments that he can feel the artifact working. As the glow increases, Darkstar says he can feel the transfer of energy. The glow gets brighter still, as Darkstar really starts to pull the energy from Kevin. Kevin's face begins to change. The glow becomes greater still, and Kevin screams, as the glow becomes too great, the screen goes white.

As the picture fades back into focus, both Darkstar and Kevin are facedown on the ground, the artifact lying between them. As Kevin starts to push himself back up to his feet, he notices his hands, and realizes that they're normal again. He puts his hands over his face, feeling it, then turns towards the camera, lowers his hands, so we can see Kevin is completely normal again. Almost afraid of what might happen, Kevin touches a nearby rock to see if he can absorb its power. Nothing happens. the artifact worked. Kevin is completely cured.

Just as I promised, say Darkstar, now standing again as well, as he reaches up and removes his mask - to reveal that he is completely normal again as well, his face once again the face of Mike Morningstar. Morningstar explains that the artifact worked exactly as it was supposed to; it allowed him to absorb all of the extra energy from Kevin's body in such a way as to cure both Kevin and himself. Now, says Morningstar, neither of them can absorb energy any more, and they can get on with their lives.

Morningstar offers Kevin his hand in thanks. Kevin hesitates a moment, then takes it. And, in that moment, while they shake hands, Morningstar hauls off with his free hand, and decks Kevin. While Kevin sits on the ground, rubbing his sore eye, Morningstar picks up the artifact and walks away, saying they're finished now, and if Kevin is wise, he'll never cross Morningstar's path again.

CUT TO: Ben and Gwen getting ready to race out on a new mission, wondering why they can't get in touch with Kevin. As if on cue, Kevin comes through the door, making one of his usual snide comments. Ben and Gwen are stunned to see that Kevin is human again. When they ask Kevin what happened, Kevin comes up with a quick story to cover the truth, saying he was as surprised as they are now when he woke up normal again this morning. Gwen notices Kevin's black eye and when she asks him about it, he says that he was so surprised at the change in himself that he accidentally walked into a door. Ben completely buys this, but the expression on Gwen's face tells us she has her doubts, as they hop into Kevin's car and race off toward their next mission.

CUT TO: Their next mission, to which I'm more than open to suggestions but which probably ought to involve some old menace we've faced before, so we don't have to do a lot of explaining. In the course of the battle, Ben and Gwen use their powers, while Kevin, now powerless, uses his ingenuity to emulate some element of his powers and prove himself still a capable member of the team.

The mission now over, Kevin is elated that he performed so well without his powers, and mutters to himself that he is even more convinced he did the right thing in working with Morningstar. Part of this is overheard by Gwen, and unnoticed by Ben and Kevin, she slips away to investigate her suspicions on her own, as we END ACT TWO.

ACT THREE OPENS as Gwen uses her Anodite powers to retrace Kevin's steps over the past several hours, until it finally leads her to Morningstar's secret HQ, where Morningstar tells Gwen he has been anxiously awaiting her. Gwen wonders what Morningstar did to Kevin, and Morningstar says he'll be more than happy to show her. Whipping off his overcoat, Morningstar reveals that he is now wearing an armored outfit that has the artifact right smack in the center of the chest. While Morningstar can no longer absorb energy on his own, the artifact can still siphon it for him. The artifact begins to glow and, as Gwen throws up defensive shields, Morningstar starts to use the artifact to siphon off her powers once and for all, the goal he has long desired.

CUT TO: Ben and Kevin, who have now discovered that Gwen is gone and wonder what happened to her. In discussion with Ben, Kevin quickly realizes that Gwen must have overheard his stupid comment about Morningstar and went off to confront him herself. Kevin is worried; if that trail leads her where he's afraid it will...

Telling Ben they've got to find Gwen and fast, Ben uses the Omnitrix to transform either into JETRAY or ECHO ECHO (I just love the idea of a character who seems capable of being in a lot of places at once) and heads off to find Gwen. Kevin follows after him in the car.

CUT TO: Morningstar's HQ, where Ben and Kevin burst in as Morningstar is in the midst of draining Gwen's power, still using the artifact. When Ben in alien form attempts to stop him, Morningstar uses the power he has already stolen from Gwen to keep Ben at bay. Kevin surveys the scene, sees what's happening, and hesitates, unsure of what to do. After all, he's only human now. Then Gwen, in pain from what Morningstar is doing to her, screams, and Kevin's mind is made up.

Seeing Kevin charging towards him, Morningstar warns him to stay away, telling him that the balance of energy involving the artifact is delicate. If Kevin interrupts the flow in any way, the consequences can be catastrophic. Seeing Gwen suffering, Kevin says he doesn't care. It doesn't matter what happens to him so long as Gwen is safe. As Morningstar screams in protest, Kevin leaps into the path of the artifact's energy-siphon, taking the full brunt of the beam himself. Both Morningstar and Kevin howl as the glow

of the beam grows brighter. Then a blinding flash of light fills the screen, and when it fades, all four of our characters are sprawled on the ground.

The first one to recover is Gwen, who staggers to her feet, and goes over to Kevin, who sits up slowly. As Gwen sees his face, she gasps. Kevin puts his hands to his face, but his hands alone tell the story. The effects of the artifact have been reversed completely, and Kevin once more a mixed element man. Gwen tells Kevin how sorry she is, but Kevin tells her he'd do the same thing again in a second if it meant saving her.

At which point, a howl of frustration and rage fills the room, and all heads turn to see Morningstar, once again looking like the grotesque thing he had become. The reversal is complete for both of them and he is now once again an energy vampire. Swearing revenge, Darkstar grabs his mask and the smoking ruins of the artifact -- hoping there may yet be some way to restore its power -- and flees before anyone can stop him, when Kevin and Gwen are both distracted for a moment by Ben coming to.

The status quo now tragically restored, our three heroes get into Kevin's car and drive away, swearing to someday deal with Darkstar once and for all, as we END EPISODE.